

Ten Common Survey Pitfalls

A review of many of the surveys being conducted today will uncover any number of strategic and tactical errors. Avoiding these common survey traps can lead to better projects and improved data quality.

The title of this month's newsletter is *Ten Common Survey Pitfalls*. These are my own choices for the top ten problem areas encountered when conducting surveys - the result of having worked with many, many groups and organizations over the years. These ten frequently committed mistakes fall into three broad categories. They are sampling, data collection, and questionnaire design. Let's take a brief look at each one.

Sampling

1. Most surveys are conducted among just a sample of people, with the intent being to generalize the findings to a broader population. The problem faced is the use of *non-probability samples*, which do not permit this generalization to occur. For inferences to be made from a sample to a larger group, the sample must be a *probability sample*, meaning that every eligible member of the population had an equal chance of being selected to participate in the survey.

2. Another common problem related to sampling is that more subjects than needed are selected to participate in the survey. A good survey can be conducted with a relatively small number of respondents. Sampling too many people adds to the project's cost and time requirement without adding substantially to the survey's precision.

3. Frequently, surveys are structured to collect data from a random individual within a unit, such as a department where we work or a household. The erroneous approach is to gather information from the person who happens to answer the telephone or the person not as busy who has time to complete the questionnaire. What occurs is an over- or under-representation of particular attitudes or specific sub-groups of people.

Data Collection

4. With the popularity of the Internet and the availability of online survey tools, many web-based studies are being conducted today. However, because Internet access is not universal, large segments of the population of

interest are being excluded, resulting in serious coverage error.

5. There is a common misconception that a survey response rate of 40% to 50% is good. In reality, response rates below 75% should be carefully considered for use. Accepting low survey response rates risks high non-response error.

6. Surveying an organization, such as a state government agency or business, is different than surveys conducted among members of the general public. Treating "establishment" surveys like general population surveys can result in unreliable data.


Questionnaire Design

7. One of the greatest threats to survey quality is the failure to define the objective of the project and the information needed to achieve the objective. Developing questions should not be the first stage of a survey. That step comes later. Clearly defining the objective must come before anything else.

8. Words and phrases that seem clear can frequently have a different meaning to other people. Designing questions that are interpreted differently by respondents due to vague and ambiguous wording is an ongoing survey problem.

9. Sometimes the questions included in surveys are beyond a respondent's ability to answer. This can be due to the respondent having no knowledge about the topic or it can be that respondents do not have access to data that is generally familiar to them.

10. Scaling and rating questions present problems when the response choices are not correctly structured. Typical mistakes involve the number of scaling points used, whether to include a middle rating point, and when to use a neutral choice or a *don't know* option.

The next time you are considering conducting a survey, working through these ten common survey pitfalls will result in a more successful project. Guaranteed! 

From the Field...

A summary of recent survey findings from across the country.



Results from a recent nationwide survey on an assortment of topics finds that recalls on imported products from China have led to 68% of Americans now checking product labels to learn where a product is manufactured prior to making a purchase. The survey also reveals that 57% of Americans believe the pay of professional athletes is "ridiculous" while 46% have the same attitude towards actors' pay.

Source: BIGResearch



Responses to a survey conducted in September in conjunction with Stanford University are not encouraging towards the natural environment in the world today.

Thirty-five percent of U.S. respondents say the condition of the Earth's environment is "fair" while 34% say it is "poor." Fifty-five percent indicate that compared to ten years ago the natural environment today is worse off, and 52% predict the environment will be even worse ten years from now.

Source: Associated Press



The Dallas Cowboys are this year's favorite team among U.S. adults who keep tabs on professional football. The Cowboys are followed by the Indianapolis Colts, the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Green Bay Packers, and the Chicago Bears as America's top five professional football franchises. Survey respondents are equally mixed when predicting this season's Super Bowl winner. One-quarter pick the Colts to win it all while 23% say the winner of Super Bowl XLII will be the New England Patriots.

Source: Harris Interactive